

## FIRST REPORT OF A GROUND NEST OF CANYON TOWHEES

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**ABSTRACT.**—Canyon Towhees (*Pipilo fuscus*) normally nest in trees, shrubs, and cacti. I found a nest on the ground under an octagonal road sign in Santa Fe County, New Mexico, on 14 May 2001. No young were fledged, but the eggs were incubated for  $\geq 10$  days. Additional records of Canyon Towhee nests in a building and an enclosed trailer are indicative of a plasticity in their nest site selection process that led to use of this unusual nest site. Received 16 January 2002, accepted 22 August 2002.

Recent check-list revisions have brought the genus *Pipilo* back up to eight species, all found between southern Canada and southern Mexico (American Ornithologists' Union 1998). At least three of the four more brightly feathered towhees commonly nest on the ground (i.e., Greenlaw 1996), usually within dense brush or scrub. Of the four species of drab "brown" towhees that occupy more open habitats, only the California Towhee (*P. crissalis*) has been recorded ground nesting, and only two instances are known (Davis 1951). Canyon Towhees (*Pipilo fuscus*) typically build their nests 1–4 m above the ground in trees, shrubs, or cacti (Johnson and Haight 1996). At its northern range limits and at higher elevations in Colorado and New Mexico, this species regularly nests in pinyon pine (*Pinus edulis*), juniper (*Juniperus* spp.), sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*), and cholla cactus (*Opuntia* spp.; Johnson and Haight 1996). The lowest previously reported nest was 0.6 m above ground in a small, 0.75-m high cholla in Tucson, Arizona (Brandt 1951). Here I report the first known instance of ground nesting by Canyon Towhees.

At 12:15 MST on 14 May 2001, while walking in Eldorado, a residential subdivision in Santa Fe County, New Mexico (35° 33' N, 105° 57' W), I accidentally flushed a drab towhee-sized bird from under a decumbent 50-cm diameter octagonal "STOP" sign. Lifting the sign, I found three eggs, whitish with brown spotting, in a nest cup of herbaceous twigs and grasses nestled amidst the vegetation (Fig. 1). The closest tree or bush was >10 m distant. I returned on 15 May, confirmed the identity of the flushing adult as a Canyon Towhee, and photographed the nest.

On my next visit, at 18:10 on 17 May, I found the sign had been turned over to one side, exposing the nest. It was still intact and contained the three eggs. I returned the sign to its position over the nest. I again flushed the female from the eggs on 24 May. However, on 7 June, the nest was disheveled and contained only half an eggshell, which was yolk-stained. Although the sign was still over the nest, an area of approximately 25 m<sup>2</sup> next to the sign recently had been mechanically mowed. It was not clear whether nest failure was the result of predation or human interference.

Canyon Towhees are found near outbuildings, woodpiles, and vehicles throughout their range (Johnson and Haight 1996) and are common in Eldorado, which is characterized by 0.4- to 1.0-ha lots and mostly native vegetation. This association with structures is not accompanied by numerous records of nesting in them; Johnson and Haight (1996) reported only two nests in buildings, including one in Santa Fe County (see Jensen 1923). During 12 years of recent residence at two locations in Santa Fe County, I have documented Canyon Towhees nesting in man-made structures on seven occasions. Three were in a building, three were in an enclosed horse trailer, and one was in a nest box with an enlarged entrance. I believe this willingness of Canyon Towhees to use man-made structures as nest sites led to the use of this ground nest hidden by the sign.

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FIG. 1. Ground nest and eggs (metal sign post on left) of Canyon Towhees, Santa Fe County, New Mexico, 15 May 2001. Photograph by D. W. Stahlecker.

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